

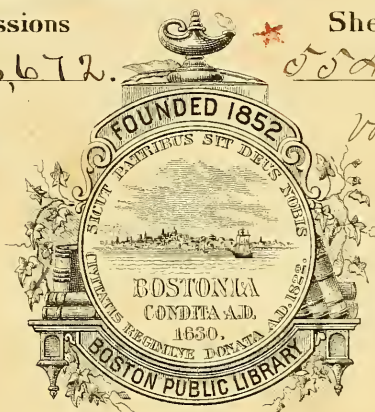


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S E R M O N ,

ON THE

ANNIVERSARY OF ORDINATION.

B_y J. BRAZER.

1837.



LESSONS OF THE PAST.

A

S E R M O N ,

O N T H E

ANNIVERSARY OF ORDINATION,

PREACHED TO

THE NORTH SOCIETY,

IN SALEM, MASS.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19TH, 1837.

BY JOHN BRAZER.

SALEM:
PRINTED AT THE GAZETTE OFFICE.
1837.

TO
THE MEMBERS OF THE NORTH SOCIETY,
IN SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS,
THIS SERMON,
WRITTEN IN THEIR SERVICE,
AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,
IS
AFFECTIONATELY AND RESPECTFULLY
INSCRIBED,
BY
THE AUTHOR.

SERMON.

I. SAMUEL, vii. 12. Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

It is obviously wise, as a matter of mere worldly prudence, to pause at certain commanding points of view, in the journey of life, to look back upon the paths we have trodden, and to cast an inquiring glance into what remains to us of our earthly pilgrimage. We may thus gather up the results of our past experience, and render them available to our future guidance.

But a retrospect like this is wise in a higher sense. It naturally disposes the mind to serious and devout thought. It brings before us, in striking contrasts, the great and affecting changes through which we have passed ; it calls us to observe the Divine Hand continually overruling our plans and efforts ; to see the gracious goodness of God in the unnumbered and unmerited blessings which have been showered upon all our paths ; to note those solemn admonitions of His providence, which have been all times around us on the right hand and on

the left ; and to mark our spiritual progress or declension in the irrevocable past.

“ How deep and awful is the pall
O'er that which nothing can recall.
The *future* is, we know not what,—
Untried, unseen, unsearchable ;
The *present*, — a contracted spot,
Where the mind will not, cannot dwell ;
And over these is ever cast
A blight or blessing from the past.”

A circumstance of interest to us in our religious relations, has led my own mind to this train of reflections. Since we last met together in these services, the Seventeenth Year of our Pastoral Connexion has elapsed, and I trust it may be mutually useful to take a thoughtful and religious notice of this event.

One of the first reflections which occurs is, that our union as Pastor and People, considered merely in reference to its Extent, is an important one in the history of our individual lives. I need not recur, in illustration of this, to the familiar topics of the swiftness, shortness, and insecurity of the days of man on earth. We know that it is scarcely figurative language to say that these days are “ like a shadow that declineth and there is none abiding” ; that we are moving in the midst of dangers seen or unseen at every moment ; that the air we breathe and the food which nourishes us, wear away the very system, which, for the time, they sustain ; that diseases in all their numerous and unwelcome train, fasten upon us in the midst of health ; that disasters befall us in the hour of our fancied security ; that in the universe of God nothing is at rest, nothing in

us or about us is permanent, but the universal law of change; that death is every where, meets us at every turn, respects no rank, favors no alliance, spares no person, ruptures all ties, employs all the elements in his service, and makes all events and circumstances the ministers of his will. These are familiar facts illustrative of the short span and frail tenure of our earthly life; and we need only thus cursorily allude to them here, to enable us to feel that the simple fact of the continuance of our union through so many years, is a subject of devout and grateful recognition.

And when in reference to this thought, we remember that whatever may be the precariousness of human life, the precariousness of human Connexions is still greater; that they are liable not only to all those changes which abridge our earthly existence, but to those additional ones which pass over human minds, and chill human hearts, and bring estrangements into human relations; we shall find new occasion to thank our God, that he has permitted our Pastoral Union to continue so long.

And this reflection is fraught with deeper interest still, when we recollect that short as is the duration of human life, it extends, ordinarily, far beyond the limits of our probation for an eternal state. The life, growth and progress of the soul is not to be measured by the lapse of years. The character,—the condition of that moral being which we call ourselves,—in most cases, becomes settled and fixed for good or ill, long before the bodily frame decays. Even in youth it often receives

a bias that is never afterwards outgrown ; and it is liable, at every succeeding step of our existence, to be precluded from further essential change, by the iron grasp of habit. The thought is a startling one that the season of moral probation may be thus early ended, that it may be closed, beyond all hope of earthly redemption, long before the close of life. But even when taken at the longest, this season of moral life and growth is virtually, and in point of fact, if not necessarily, diminished by a variety of circumstances. — It is thus diminished by the unconscious days of infancy, and of all that portion of childhood and youth, of pupillage and dependence, which is passed in preparing to live, with scarcely a perception of the moral uses and ends of existence. — It is diminished by the whole time surrendered to sleep, and to the necessary care and restoration of the physical frame. — It is diminished by all that portion of life which is worn away in severe sickness, weariness, debility, pain, and exhaustion of the body ; and by all unavoidable depression, despondency, anxiety, torpor and helplessness of mind. — It is diminished by all the hours consumed in listlessness, idle fancies, unavailing wishes, foolish day-dreams, and, in general, by all those “time-wasters” which only serve to annihilate the present, without making any provision for the future. — It is diminished, yet further, and yet more deplorably, by every sinful act and indulgence ; since vice in all its forms, is not only a negative, but a positive destroyer of time ; not only defeats the opportunities of improvement as they pass, but indisposes us to a right use of those which remain. If, then, in

view of the moral uses of life, all these deductions are to be made from its duration, which at the longest is so short, and at the safest is so uncertain ; we shall look back on the time we have been permitted to pass together, in the sacred connexion of Pastor and People, in earnest thankfulness.

But the mere lapse of time, — the coming and the passing of a few hours and days and months and years, more or less, — is of comparatively little importance. As it is by the succession of thoughts in our minds that we gain our idea of time, so it is by the peculiar interest which, from any source, these thoughts acquire, that life derives its value. The only life that is of much consequence, is the life of thought, feeling, sentiment, effort, action. This depends, of course, greatly upon the outward Changes of our condition ; and hence it is that, in a retrospect of the past, these changes should be accurately and religiously noted.

Now the Changes of Seventeen Years, in the most even current of existence, are great and momentous. Infancy has passed on, through the successive stages and employments of opening life, into the perilous state of youth. Many, whose birth I well remember, and on whose foreheads, it has been my privilege to place the holy seal of Baptism, are now in the full bloom of ripened glowing youth. Several, who came as children to be instructed in the Catechism, are now heads and parents of families. Youth, with its teeming heart and fruitful brain, has settled down into the sober cares and fixed pursuits of manhood. Young men and women, just then launching into

life, have now run through almost all the vicissitudes of the eventful voyage. Manhood has passed over the meridian of life, and is now hastening downward, with accelerated steps, toward the western sky. And old age, having been continually dropping, one by one, the remnants of life and strength, now the wreck of his former self, stands trembling on the brink of his grave.

Meanwhile, Events, Changes, prosperous and adverse, each in its time and place, have been continually occurring. Within this period, the whole condition of the civilized world around us has been changed. Old and decayed dynasties have been broken up, and new ones founded. Thrones have been overtopped or overturned. Those great disturbers of human peace, misnamed military heroes, have gone to lay their heads as low as the myriads of victims who have poured out their life-blood to gratify a wicked or insane ambition. Moral changes in the human condition have been greater and more extraordinary still. Topics of an engrossing public nature, which, only a little while since, arrayed men into hostile parties; evoked the fiery spirit of controversy; called forth mutual offence and recrimination; brought disunion and estrangement into social life; have now passed away and left the disputants to look back and wonder at the heat and turmoil of the conflict. In no similar period, probably, since human civilization began, have such great alterations in human sentiment, on great moral subjects, taken place. Never within the same period, have men moved in such masses to effect moral ends. Government and laws have apparently

become secondary things ; while public opinion, inspiring great multitudes and moving them as one, and at will, has effected and is effecting results, which transcend the wildest imaginings of their first promoters. Authority, prescription, long established usage, customary channels of thought, are all broken in upon. Nothing now, seems clearly to be ascertained ; nothing determinately settled ; nothing too sacred to be assailed ; nothing too well established to be overthrown. First principles on all subjects, are continually sought out as for the first time. The era is, and has been, a momentous one, and it calls upon all serious, thoughtful, philanthropic men to labour, each in his place and sphere, to overrule these jarring elements, and direct these unwonted energies of the general mind, to wise and worthy ends.

But changes, less public and obvious, indeed, yet more deeply felt perhaps, have been written in our own individual history. We have each of us experienced our peculiar allotments in the varied providence of God. We have each of us been called to take an appropriate part in the business of life ; and this, whatever may have been its distinctive character, has been liable to various vicissitudes. New situations have imposed new cares and aims. New connexions have opened new sources of interest. Our social relations have been varied. Hard partings and happy meetings, painful absence and home-born joys, have alternately succeeded each other. Property has been gained or lost ; confidence respected or abused ; friendships have been formed or broken ; tenderer alliances have been perfected or

ruptured ; new homes have been opened to us, or those of our childhood left desolate ; the ties of domestic life have been multiplied or rent asunder. God's great earthly blessings of health, active pursuits, the cheerful engagements of business, the kind courtesies of society, have been bestowed upon us ; or we have been called to exchange these for the darkened chamber, the unwelcome seclusion, the anxious cares, and the unwonted pains that wait on disease. Mental states, changes of feeling in all their untold and unaccountable variety of peace, trust, joy on the one hand, or of disquiet, dismay, solicitude and fear, on the other, have been, in succession our lot. New friends have been added to our chosen circle, or the sadder, the final change of death, has passed upon some dear to us, and an irreparable void has been left in our hearts. — In a word, each of these six thousand days of our connexion, which has now passed away, has brought with it its peculiar vicissitude, and has imposed upon us its peculiar duty, and thus it is, that this period, measured by the succession of Events, Circumstances and Aspects of life, is one of deep and serious importance.

But the past has an interest far greater than that which can be measured by the lapse of time, or even by the succession of events. It presents to us a “ world for thought,”—for serious, searching thought,—though the life and the light of it have fled. In the Christian's estimate, it is not regarded merely as a component part of that short term of life, which begins at the cradle and ends at the grave ; not merely as a variously checkered scene in our earthly pilgrimage ; but as an important period of

moral probation,—of the discipline of character,—of preparation for the deathless career of the soul. It is this that gives its real, its solemn significance to life. It is this that stamps a priceless value on every moment. It is this that renders it a fearful thing to live—to be.

What then has been our spiritual growth or our spiritual declension, during the last Seventeen Years? This is the great question. What we have received, or what we have lost; what we have enjoyed or what we have suffered;—are questions of small import compared with the all-concerning ones—What have we done?—What have we been?—What is the moral history of each of us as it is written in the book of God's remembrance?

In looking back upon this period, we shall perceive that there has not been a single day or hour in which we have not been the objects of God's care, or in which we have not received multi-fold expressions of His Divine Beneficence. He has given to every particle of air, through this period, its vital power. He has endowed every morsel of food with its capacity of sustaining life. He has arrayed and attuned every ray of light, by which the soul holds communion with the world without. He has upholden us at every safe step we have taken. He has endowed every muscle of our frames with its appropriate energy and office. In our unconscious sleep, he has watched over us. He has given us our homes, and all that the word includes. Amidst dangers innumerable, he has protected us. He has continued to us our faculties of mind and heart. Indeed —

why protract the enumeration — all and every thing that life is, or life confers, or gives to life its value and its use, has been the gracious gift of God, at every turn and every instant of this long period through which we have passed. This, if we have the ordinary seriousness of human nature, should suggest to us the inquiry whether our Gratitude has been commensurate with our blessings — whether this unceasing, this wholly unmerited goodness of our God has bound our hearts to Him, more and more, in grateful love.

Again; this has been a season of Heavenly Counsels and Divine Admonitions. If we will look back considerately, we shall perceive that not a day has passed without them; that they have been varied in a thousand ways, and have been directed to all that is thoughtful and solemnizing in our natures. God has been speaking to us of the transitoriness of human life, in every declining sun; and waning moon; and setting star; and flitting cloud; and sighing wind; and withering leaf; and perishing flower; in every vanishing moment of time; in every ebbing pulse; in every fluctuation of health or strength or life; in the fading visions of youth; in the graver experience of riper years; in the yet sadder forecastings of age; in the narrowing circle of early friends,—in fine,—in all that makes us to know and feel, with unwonted impression, what “shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue.” And what has been the effect of these heavenly admonitions? Have they fallen upon our hearts with a salutary influence? Have they served to wean us from an undue attachment to present

objects ; to remind us of the true end of existence ; and to place before us the real condition of life ? Have they excited us to redeem misused time and neglected opportunities ; — to correct infirmities of temper and feeling ; — to think of omitted duties ; — to remember broken vows ; — to mourn over the triumph of temptation ; — to crucify our bosom sin ?

“ O God ! that we should dare to *do*
That which we dare not think upon ;
Deeds that *will* stand before our view,
With all their fatal lustre gone ;
Their darker hue alone shall last,
Recorded in the immortal *past*.”

But there are Religious Instructions of a more direct, and palpable character, which come under review on an occasion like this. We have been partakers, continually, of the Gospel Dispensation, with all its privileges and hopes. We have, moreover, been placed in a condition peculiarly favorable to religious light and advancement. Nowhere beneath the circuit of the sun, at no period since Christianity dawned upon the world, have greater privileges been enjoyed, than have been bestowed upon us. They are, it is believed, inadequately estimated, even by ourselves. I do not refer merely to the fact, that the abstract right of free inquiry and of private judgment, are secured and universally acknowledged. This is the common heritage of American citizens ; but what I distinctly mean is, that these rights can be carried into their full effect on religious subjects, by every individual amongst us, without fear, and, — if temperately and conscientiously used, — without

reproach. And what is yet further peculiarly distinctive is, that this liberty of free discussion and of private judgment, which naturally tends to excess, is with us controlled, by a healthful public sentiment, — a part of the spirit of our Pilgrim Sires not yet extinct, — which prevents these rights from degenerating into the means and occasions of licentiousness. They are thus made the allies and not the foes of Christianity. This, — not to enlarge upon any kindred topics, — presents a combination of influences most friendly to religious improvement. They are confined, as I have intimated, to an extremely small circle. And at no time, further, since the settlement of this country, have these privileges been more fully enjoyed, and effectively used, than during the last twenty years. The great central principle of the Christian Religion, as we understand it, — I mean the strict Unity of God, — together with its kindred doctrines, has been avowed, explained and defended, in the midst of us, with a directness, power and success, which render this period one of the most remarkable in the religious annals of our land. A conscientious, undoubtedly, but yet a severe warfare has been carried on against these views of Revealed truth, but it has served only to spread them wider and to root them deeper. Strong measures have been employed to countervail their influence ; but they have still made their way. And though they are not calculated, perhaps, ever to acquire a popular ascendancy, yet they have gained a hold upon a class of minds, and are quietly making a progress, which should fill the hearts of

their friends with gratitude, and trust, and hope. In these advantages, we, as a people, have participated; and hence it becomes a subject of serious thought, whether our religious advancement has kept progress with our religious opportunities. If not, they will afford us little reason for congratulation. Little will it avail us that religious opinion is more free from legal restraints, — that religious inquiry is more unfettered and active, — that religion itself is better apprehended by the understanding, — if it have, thereby, become less efficacious as a principle of conduct; more a matter of barren speculation; less strong in its hold upon the heart.

But there are circumstances in our Religious Condition, of a more intimate and personal character, which deserve a grateful remembrance on an occasion like the present. As a Religious Society, we have ever experienced the gracious favor of God. “Hitherto,” we may well say, “hath the Lord helped us.” During the whole period that has elapsed since January, A.D. 1773, when your first minister was ordained — now nearly sixty-five years — there have been but three Pastors, and the pastoral office has been vacant in this whole space of time, only a little more than a year and six months.

The long, the quiet, the affectionate, the useful ministry of your first Pastor, Dr. BARNARD, has, with the younger part of this generation, become almost a matter of history and tradition. Still, by many yet surviving, his venerable presence, his assiduous attention to duty, his mild and catholic deportment, and his paternal kindness to the young, are yet affectionately recollected.

To him succeeded One, who is more widely and freshly remembered. The ministry of Mr. ABBOT was short and greatly interrupted by sickness ; but still it was long enough to leave ineffaceable tokens in many hearts. Devoted to God in Christ, at his very birth, by a mother, who scarcely survived the holy act of consecration, he appeared to be singularly destined to the ministry of the Gospel ; and freely gave all the gifts and graces of his mind and heart to its sacred duties. His soul seemed to be habitually pervaded by holy influences ; and even strangers, who were thrown casually into his society, felt that they were in the presence of a pure and spiritual being. Those who were privileged with a nearer intimacy, will well remember the deep humility and unaffected meekness of his spirit, the lovely mildness of his bearing, and the engaging simplicity of his manners. And you who have known him as a Christian Minister, can never forget the earnestness, the seriousness, the impressiveness, the solemnity, the chastened fervor of his public services. Indeed, he was one of those rare specimens of the Christian Character, which once seen, is henceforth treasured up in the memory, as a living illustration of holy truth. And of him, as a Teacher of Christianity, the lines are beautifully descriptive,—

“ He bore his great commission in his look ;
But sweetly tempered awe, and softened all he spoke.”

Of the period which has elapsed since the 14th of November, A.D. 1820, — leaving to those who will hereafter stand in this place, to speak of its peculiar characteristics, — I will only observe, that it is one which has been marked by many mani-

festations of Divine favor. That it has been permitted thus to continue, is somewhat remarkable, especially when viewed in connexion with the fact, that the peculiar sanctity of the pastoral tie, which, in former times, was scarcely less inviolable than that of the marriage covenant, has been, by degrees, more and more disregarded ; that the relation, once thus sacred, has, most unhappily, in many instances, become one of temporary liking and convenience ; that it seems to be dying out in many places ; and that, generally, the old foundations of our Congregational Churches have been broken up throughout the community. But in yet other respects, “ hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” We have enjoyed a large share of those blessings which render this relation desirable. Our increase in numbers has been great. Our union has been unbroken. We have gone through the trial, — almost always a perilous one, — of exchanging an old place of worship for a new one, with great and encouraging success. You have erected this massive, commodious, and delightful place for our mutual worship, which will remain to generations after generations of your descendants, an illustrious monument of your enlightened zeal in the support of Christian Truth and Christian Institutions. We have been permitted to meet here, Sunday after Sunday, in mutual love and confidence, to keep holy time ; to follow, in united interest, after the leadings of Divine truth ; and to lay our hearts together in holy sympathies. “ Hitherto,” indeed, “ hath the Lord helped us” — and for these rich blessings of His providence, let us bring to Him the fervent expressions of our grateful hearts.

Of my individual experience, during this long period, I hardly dare trust myself to speak. The morning of November 14th, A.D. 1820, when I took upon myself the solemn vows of ordination, is, in all its particular circumstances, as fresh in my memory, as are the events of yesterday. Whatever may have been my defects in the observance of these vows, I can truly say, that they have ever rested on my mind, as the rule of duty, and as the law of life. It is due also to you to say, that your prevailing kindness, and the many tokens of your confidence and regard, have left an impression on my heart, that no time can obliterate. And in respect to especial marks of consideration and good will, — passing all those of a more individual and personal character, — I cannot but mention an act of munificent kindness, at the early part of the present year, which, valuable as it was in itself, and especially timely as it was, under the circumstances in which it was rendered, — was greatly enhanced by the thoughtfulness and delicacy, with which it was bestowed. In review of these things, I adopt, as mine, the language of the Apostle to his friends at Philippi, and say, in deep sincerity, — “ I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, (always, in every prayer of mine for you all, making request with joy,) for your fellowship in the Gospel, from the first day until now.” And I have only to hope and pray that God may spare my life, and give me grace, to show you, that I know how to appreciate such continued tokens of confidence and esteem.

But while I thus freely render to you those acknowledg-

ments which are justly your due on this account, I must still be permitted to say, that there is one return on the part of every Christian people, for faithful endeavors of their Pastor, and especially for the religious opportunities they enjoy, more precious than any other. It is their Spiritual Improvement. It is their "growth in grace." His happiness, of course, will greatly depend upon their kindness and good will; and the indifference or alienation of any individual, is matter of sincere concern. But there is a bitterer grief than this. — It is to see his labors vain. — It is to feel himself, in any measure, responsible for the interests of immortal souls, and not to see the "work of the Lord prospering in his hands." — It is to pray, labor, and strive, day after day, for the spiritual welfare of valued friends, and yet find them careless and unmoved; or only stopping for a moment to listen to the faithful call of religion, and then rushing on, in utter forgetfulness of it, to the engrossing interests of a wasting life, and a perishing world. Remember, dear friends! O remember now, — that the "past of time and sense" will soon become "the present of eternity;" that you and I have a strict account to render; that every sincere prayer here offered that does not bear with it to God our hearts; that every utterance of Divine Truth, which meets with no response in our souls, — in a word — every fitting religious opportunity that we permit ourselves to undervalue or neglect, is not merely an opportunity for religious improvement lost — but it is an opportunity perverted. — It does not leave us where we were in our Christian course,

but it removes us further and further, from the great goal of a Christian life, — a Christian's heaven. No greater evil can betide a people, than to hear God's preached word without improvement.

These thoughts are urged upon our minds by the remembrance of the more solemn and affecting changes which have befallen us as fellow worshippers. Of those who, Seventeen Years ago, united in the services which sanctioned our union, there are scarcely any who have escaped, either directly in their own persons, or by sympathy with their most intimate friends, the graver visitations of the Divine Hand. Some have been called to the severe discipline of an altered fortune. Others, yielding to the imperious call of duty and of honorable enterprise, have left us, to pass weary days and nights of absence, on the restless ocean, or in foreign climes. Sickness has wasted the strength of many. And in looking round upon the various families who meet me here in social worship, I see scarcely a single one that has not been called to the remediless trial of bereavement. I seek for well remembered countenances, but I seek in vain. Husband and father; wife and mother; parent and child; brother and sister; near connexions and dear friends; have been taken from our circle, to join the mightier congregation of the dead, and their spirits have gone to Him who gave them. The work of life, with them, is forever ended! — its opportunities forever passed! — its record written! — its future condition decided! O God! — what a thought! O let it come home to us now — now, before it is too late!

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